

Saving a buck or two

It's money in your pocket, the AAFES way

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photo by Staff Sgt. Verlin Levi Collins

Tent cities look the same the world over. In desert regions, they look like settings in the Clint Eastwood classic "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly."

Fine dust blows across a dirt road that runs in between tents, heat shimmers the images of Airmen walking to work, a bright red mountain bike is parked outside a tent like a horse tethered to a hitching post.

A new bike in a war zone? What's up with that?

It's a known fact in the Army and Air Force Exchange Service that the longer Airmen are at a deployed location, the more they desire an extensive assortment of goods and services. Thus, new bikes parked outside tents, blended ice coffee mochas and pedicures. Many stateside bases don't even offer these types of services.

"Sometimes I listen to the troops and think that maybe they don't think they're at war. But then I think again that it's AAFES' mission to get whatever they want for just that reason — because they are at war," said Maj. Gen. Kathryn Frost, the exchange service commander.

In light of the global war on terrorism, AAFES officials are placing more emphasis on

supporting deployed Airmen warriors. In addition, they also take care of the needs of family members at home, many times through programs that strive to keep the two connected.

Following are tips on how Airmen can save money.

Free shipping

Consider the cost of shipping a red bike to the desert. On second thought, forget about it because AAFES takes care of the shipping cost. Not only is this courtesy extended to deployed Airmen, it's a worldwide policy. So, next holiday season, why pay for shipping when you can order something from the AAFES catalog and have it sent for free?

'Down range' pricing

Regardless of which exchange you visit, be it at Minot Air Force Base, N.D., or Balad Air Base, Iraq, the price for most items will be identical. This means that if you buy a dog sled in Alaska, it would be priced the same in Iraq. What you

do with a dog sled in Iraq is your business.

Exchange phone cards

The Military Exchange 550-Unit Global Prepaid Calling Card provides up to 140 minutes of call time from deployed locations. Buy the cards at local exchanges or over the Internet at www.aafes.com. Store officials say the cards are the best deal going because many prepaid telephone cards may look like a better deal, but have higher international rates and connection charges. Also, anybody can purchase and donate one of the exchange cards to a deployed Airman, also via the Internet.

Gifts from the homefront

Basically, these are AAFES gift certificates for deployed servicemembers. Any American can log onto the store's Web site, buy one and have it sent to a deployed Airman, as long as the Airman has an APO address. Gift certificates can also be donated to servicemembers

in need through the American Red Cross, Fisher House, United Service Organizations and Air Force Aid Society.

Gift cards

These prepaid cards can be loaded with up to \$1,500 of store-shopping fun. The benefits are threefold. Bulky gifts jam up the military mail system — especially during holiday seasons. Gift-givers avoid mailing costs and Airmen can select gifts they want and not be forced to wear bunny slippers in the desert.

AAFES Centric Mall

It's an online concessionaire bonanza. With 35 virtual stores to shop from, Airmen worldwide can get 10- to 30-percent military discounts. Some stores sell compact discs for \$9.99, while others specialize in baby clothes or tires. In addition, all the stores accept the Military Star Card. It's worth checking out at www.centricmall.com. However, shipping charges and taxes may apply in some concessions.

Price surveys

Store surveys found AAFES shoppers save an average of 21.89 percent over commercial retailers. Every month, AAFES tests the waters off base to see what commercial stores are charging for certain items. It's called a market-basket survey. Of the six stores they select and the 150 items they compare at random, AAFES tries to keep its price equal to or lower than its competitors. Of course, if shoppers find better bargains off base, they can challenge the price and AAFES will match that price on the spot — if it's \$5 or less, or make adjustments if it's more.

Big ticket items

Airmen who are deployed or stationed in Alaska, Hawaii or Puerto Rico can buy diamonds, big-screen televisions and certain furniture and figurines that aren't available for stateside customers. Next time you're deployed, why not purchase that big-screen TV because there will not be any shipping or taxes involved.

No taxes

Speaking of no taxes, AAFES charges no taxes.

Military STAR Card

If you hadn't thought about applying for a Military Star Card, a good time to do it would be before you deploy. The card offers a 6 percent annual percentage rate and deferred payments during the entire deployment, as long as the deployment is 90 days or more. Additionally, in the event a servicemember gets killed in action, AAFES cancels the debt. ♡

Given the chance,

AAFES will set up shop just about anywhere to reach the troops. Here they set up a bazaar for troops in Baghdad, Iraq, inside one of Saddam Hussein's swimming pools.

Top 10 selling items at deployed locations

1. AT&T unit calling cards
2. Red Bull
3. Copenhagen
4. Snickers
5. Starkist Tuna
6. Kit Kat
7. Vienna sausages
8. M&Ms
9. Ham salad lunch kit
10. Slim Jim



Did you know?

There are more than 30 AAFES locations within Iraq. Shop on line at www.aafes.com.